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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the school improvement process based on Effective Schools Research (ESR) and its commitment to equitable and quality education for minority and poor children. After briefly discussing general attributes of ESR-based programs, the essay explains major premises of the effective school. The first premise sets teaching and learning as the primary schooling function, assigning secondary importance to custodial and sorting functions. Other premises concern assessment of student outcomes, monitoring, curriculum mastery, and equal benefits issues. To incorporate these research premises into school practice, the school leader must draw upon three sources of locally derived information: measurable student outcomes, socioeconomic status data, and specified levels of curriculum mastery. The school improvement effort depends on a shared vision and commitment of the school community and it demands staff and organizational development and planned change. Planning steps are described that focus on the needs assessment process and on characteristics of effective schools: (1) a safe and orderly environment, (2) a climate of high expectations, (3) sound instructional leadership, (4) a clear and focused mission, (5) opportunity to learn and student time on task, (6) frequent monitoring of student progress, and (7) supportive home-school relations. (MLH)

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT BASED ON EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS RESEARCH

A Promising Approach for Economically Disadvantaged and Minority Students

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April, 1985

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We can, whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need, in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depends on how we feel about the fact that we haven't done it so far.....Ron Edmonds.

A life-long professional educator recently shared a thought that helped him make sense and meaning out of a particularly perplexing school workday whose results held little evidence of his making a difference for the very children in his instructional care whom he knew needed his help the most. On those unsettling days, he reported, " I have to live the questions. I ask the questions, and then, I live with them."

This essay asks questions. As each reader responds to the content of the questions it becomes simpler to articulate one's professional actions. "What is it I do every working day? Why am I doing it? What are the motives, the goals, and the resulting activities which constitute my professional commitment each school day? What does that input mean in terms of output for each child in the school population I serve?"

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Motives and Intentions

The substance of this essay addresses the process of school improvement based upon a body of inquiry called the Effective Schools Research [ESR]. The first compelling issue to be addressed must be the educator's motive for school improvement. Ron Edmonds' eloquent and powerful quotation speaks to both technology and motive. The responsibility and ramifications of educating American youth is awesome and calls for an extraordinary commitment from those involved. Before proceeding with any school improvement process or program, each professional unit, so dedicated, would serve all students' best interests by asking,"What is our motive for doing this? What are our expectations?"

In recent years, American society has experienced a media blitz calling for educational reform. The assumption is that by implementing the recommendations implicit in these reports and studies, "school improvement" would occur.

The reform proposals contain an abundant supply of "shoulds" and "oughts" to achieve the desired ends . For example, ."High schools should increase their graduation requirements;" or "All schools ought to increase the amount of homework for students." These prescriptions most often fail to provide a studied explanation of why the reform should be undertaken, or for whom the benefit will accrue. Is what is good for some, actually beneficial for all?

Ask: "Why will increasing graudate requirements result in school improvement?" Or, "How will additional homework help those who are currently failing to keep pace, or who are only marginally able to complete currently assigned tasks?"

Responding quickly to calls for reform may cloud the important question that needs asking, "Whose schooling is of interest to us?" That question immediately uncovers our motive. The answer reveals our intention.

When a school decides to initiate a school improvement program using the Effective Schools Research, the first question put to the staff on the initial visit is, "What will constitute evidence of school improvement in your school or district?" It becomes immediately apparent to the staff that there is not just one meaning attributed to the phrase "school improvement." They will need to agree upon theirs , and own it. Further, and more importantly, defining school improvement forces that school community to examine its motive for "doing it at all." Finally, working through this soul-searching and definitive task, encourages the staff to work toward a shared vision of what school improvement will be for their school, and permits them to develop a plan with strategies and priorities to which they have agreed to commit.

Almost without exception the shared vision and commitment of school groups engaged in ESR school improvement is that all children, and especially the children of the poor and of minorities, will be assured an equitable and quality education.

Distinctive Attributes of Effective Schools Research (ESR)-Based Programs of School Improvement.

The ESR-based school improvement programs have associated with them a set of attributes which, when taken as a set, provide a rationale for why this approach to school improvement holds promise for economically disadvantaged and minority students.

A. Quality and Equity

The first attribute of the model is that it focuses on both quality of education and equality of educational opportunity. For a school to be judged as already effective or improving, it must be able to demonstrate that both quality and equity are concurrently present in the school.

The rationale for the assessing of a school's effectiveness in these terms is found in the answer to this simple question: "What does this nation say it wants from its public schools?" Consistently, throughout this nation, across states, and within local school units, constituencies expect their children to experience a quality education, and, in addition, the public believes that all school children will have an equal educational opportunity. If this is indeed the perceived educational mission of our public schools, then it would follow that any school wishing to claim that it is effective will be able to substantiate that claim. And further a school embarking on school improvement will incorporate quality and equity into its purpose and goals. While there may

be room for disagreement on particular definitions of an effective school, excellent school, or improving school, there can be no compromise on the commitment to both quality and equity, if a school purports to be basing its improvement on ESR. Ask the question: "Does this school's definition of an effective school address both quality and equity?"

B. Research Based

A second attribute of ESR-based programs of school improvement centers on its research-founded model. The various ESR programs across the country have taken their content direction largely from the effective schools and effective teaching research which has evolved over the last fifteen or so years. In addition, these programs adopt their process direction from three interdependent bodies of related research: effective staff development; effective organizational development in education, and effective planned change programs.

Researchers and practitioners are quick to report that there is much yet to be learned about and from these content and process strands. School improvement programs, when in process themselves, produce valuable evidence. Inspite of the unknowns, we do know that when it comes to school improvement, there are some things that work better than others. As more programs of school improvement get underway, and as some move further along, our knowledge base of what should be done and how it should get done will become even richer than it now is.

C. "Data Driven"

A third attribute of the ERS-based programs of school improvement is that the model through out its structural components is "data driven." That means that local school instructional decision making is very dependent upon the weight of measurable or observable evidence. Data driven evidence is useful for planned change. It provides answers which transcend more subjective professional judgments. In addition, such a model in place offers a flexibility to attend to what is important and necessary. A teacher and classroom whose effort and acheivement demonstrate that they have mastered or exceeded the school's goal on an area of the school's essential curriculum, can go on to the next priority. The teacher is immune to intervention at this juncture.

Similarly, an individual school in a school system focusing on school improvement, is understood by the district to be immune from a specific school improvement effort when (instead of "if") it can demonstrate that all of its students have mastered the essential curriculum

When individual teachers or an entire faculty are found to be effective in teaching all the students, such events should be celebrated. Students and teachers are encouraged to continue to do what they have been doing, because what they have been doing works! The "data driven" model is attractive. It permits teachers and schools to be versatile and flexible,

and instructionally focused. The three attributes, when considered collectively, do set apart Effective Schools Research-based programs from other approaches to school improvement.

Major Premises of the Effective School

Much of the research on effective schools utilizes the paradigm which can best be described as case studies of effective school practice. That is, the researchers identify places of schooling where intended outcomes are obtained and then study those environments to determine the practices which appear to characterize how that school is different from other schools. To do so, researchers must have a clear conceptual and operational definition of what constitutes an effective practice in this specific effective school. They have developed a definition which rests on several premises. These will be reviewed to help school leaders toward a clear understanding of those factors which are present in an effective school working toward further school improvement based on ESR.

Premise I

The primary function of schooling is teaching and learning. Although disarmingly simple, the effective school based upon ESR, will evidence this priority, in spite of the prevalence of competing alternative functions assigned by contemporary society as the chief purposes of schooling. Many

would say that schools serve a custodial care function or provide a sorting and selecting mechanism. The quality of life and the ultimate career choices of students, for example, are important; however such provisions must not become the overarching functions of schools. The effective school will have a mission of teaching and learning, even though this mission is grounded in the assumption that the teaching and learning will occur in an atmosphere where there is safety, orderliness, and an optimal opportunity to learn.

Schools have historically served as institutions that sort and select children for college, for special education and for alternative curricular tasks. While schools may always be asked to perform this function, it is only secondary to teaching and learning. The recent calls for reform appear to encourage the sorting and selecting function. The probable impact of the pressure imposed on schools to increase graduation requirements will be felt by students at all points along the achievement spectrum, but most negatively by the lower achieving students. Although it is naive to say that teaching and learning can be the exculsive school focus, a school community can decide that these elements will be the primary focus.

Premise 2

How will the school community know that it is doing a

better job of teaching and learning? The second premise of the ESR based programs of school improvement is that the primary basis for assessing the increased effectiveness of the school is in terms of students' outcomes.

The assessment of student outcomes as the primary basis for judging the effectiveness of a school may seem obvious; actually the outcomes standard just described is a radical departure from much past practice. This fact is borne out by the prevalence of accreditation practices which rely on "inputs" and "processes" for assessing schooling. ESR emphasizes assessment through outcomes.

In all likelihood the accountability movement which has pressed human service institutions into producing "effects," "impacts," and "outcomes" will not diminsh. Facing the fact that accountability pressures may intensify, educators would be well-advised to address the challenge of developing and articulating the outcomes by which their students will be assessed. Deciding which outcomes of schooling are of greatest importance to a student body is a process which is extremely useful in planning a program for school improvement. It focuses the collegial discussion on "What outcomes we care most about?" and, on "What indicators will be monitored to determine whether the outcomes of interest are being achieved by all students?"

Educators will gain public confidence when observable or measurable outcomes are used to substantiate claims that a school is effective. Merely stating that, "Our school is doing a good job," appears to have little impact on today's public. And, placing the institutional emphasis on observable or measurable indicators of student outcomes, will have a positive influence upon the staff. Organizational energies flow toward a common purpose, providing a powerful impetus for the improvement of teaching and learning . In a complex organization, such as a school, what gets measured gets done!

Premise 3

In the studies of effective schools, the researchers state a third premise which has been a source of concern to many school practitioners. The researchers propose that the way in which a local school district chooses to monitor student outcomes is indicative of the educational outcomes that the district cares most about.

Frequently educators argue that the outcomes they are assessing locally are "really not" what they believe to be the important outcomes of schooling. In other cases, practitioners say that the outcomes that they have selected to assess locally are, "only part of a much larger group of outcomes of concern."

In response to these two statements, a question or two will assist with clarification. First: Is it realistic to spend human time and talent and financial resources on any

assessment effort which is off the target of the school's "real" concerns? Second: Is it not possible to find or develop assessment instruments which do match curricular outcomes of critical concern to educators?

It is a challenge to relinquish traditional or comfortably entrenched assessment practices, even when they appear not to be measuring the outcomes of greatest concern. The most important outcomes of schooling are not always easily assessed. Nevertheless the effort is essential. For educators to know that they have taught effectively and to ascertain that the students are learning with efficacy, they must be able to describe the resulting knowledge, skills, and behaviors which indicate student mastery.

Premise 4

An effective school is one which demonstrates both quality and equity in its program outcomes.

Research is becoming more convincing about the belief that all students can demonstrate school success, especially when success is defined as mastery of the essential curriculum.

Americans continue to expect their public schools to provide an opportunity for every student to obtain a quality education, and to insure that each student is offered equal educational opportunity. Therefore, for a school to say that it is effective for students, it must evidence the concurrent presence of quality and equity. How will schools choose to promote both equity and quality instruction for their students? There are several approaches.

For most school improvement efforts based upon ESR, the issue of quality is directly associated with the level of achievement which the students exhibit on local outcome measures. The determination of equity is associated with the distribution of achievement as it applies to student outcomes based upon those same local measures.

Two outcome standards are anticipated in effective schools: First, the overall level of achievement to which the students rise on the outcome measures must be sufficiently high to signify acceptable mastery of the essential curriculum. Second, the distribution of achievement must not vary significantly across the major subsets of the student population. (That is, the middle socioeconomic [SES] students, versus the lower SES students.) Some will do better than others, certainly; setting this standard does indicate, however, that the proportion of students from any one subset of students demonstrating mastery on the outcome measures cannot attain at a significantly higher or lower level than any other subset of the entire student population. Acceptance of this premise and the supporting rationale permits local policy makers to incorporate a suitable method of planning for and monitoring their customized and desired goals and outcomes.

Premise 5

The final premise identified with local ESR school improvement practice rests upon the belief that quality and equity are achieved and maintained only when the school improvement effort has been designed to accrue benefits for "all" students.

Local school authorities may evaluate their intentions in this regard by asking, "What indicators will we monitor to determine if our school is improving?" And, "How will we analyze and report those indicators to insure that the improvement effort is reaching and benefitting all students?"

Considered in the aggregate, these five premises provide a useful framework for defining an effective school both operationally and conceptually. Using this formulation, a local school leader may confidently proceed with an assessment of school effectiveness, based upon ESR definitions.

The Premises at Work in the Local School

To incorporate these research premises into school practice, the school leader must draw upon three sources of locally derived information: First, the outcomes in which the local district is most interested must be measured—and frequently. Data must be recorded for each student in the areas of interest. Second, some measure of social class and family background (socioeconomic status [SES]) has to be available and noted for each student. Finally, the school or

district must agree upon and specify an acceptable level of mastery in each curricular area selected for emphasis. That standard of acceptability means that the student, once achieving it, will predictably attain mastery at the next grade level in that school or district.

With this information, the school leadership or improvement team can answer these questions: "What proportion of the school's middle SES students demonstrated mastery? " "What proportion of the school's lower SES students demonstrated mastery?" If two conditions obtain, the school may be said to be effective. If, overall, the proportion of students demonstrating mastery is high (eg. 95%), and if the proportions of students from the various SES groupings is equal, (eg. MSES + 95%, LSES + 95%) then the school meets the two standards prerequisite to school effectiveness.

The process just described, that is examining outcome data by subsets of a school's student population, has been described as a disaggregated analysis of achievement. It is a technique which can be used to explore other problems, issues, or concerns. For example, if the staff is interested in knowing if a students' mastery of essential skills is related to attendance, they may look at the outcome data according to attendance groups. They will examine outcome data recorded for students who missed more than ten days of school in a year and compare it with outcomes for students who were absent less than 10 days. Such analyses present with clarity the impact of

attendance on students' mastery of the essential curriculum. Achievement outcomes of this character are useful tools. They help focus upon the distribution of achievement across student groups and across an achievement continuum. It is a different emphasis from that provided when measures of central tendency are utilized — such as the mean performance of students-and is a process which appears more in keeping with the national goals of education—quality and equity for all.

School Improvement Planning and Implementation.

If a school or district chooses to improve schools using the ESR as the approach, then the school community accepts the premises described. The goals are explicit. They are to increase the level and alter the distribution of those student outcomes that reflect the school's essential curricular goals. It is important to note that many well-intentioned educators are engaged in so-called "effective schools" programs which simply do not attend to student outcomes. These school improvement efforts may be, in fact, accomplishing goals, but the goals are not ESR based.

The remainder of this essay describes the school improvement process based upon the assumption that a school or district has adopted the ESR approach.

The improvement effort itself is a shared vision of the school and has the commitment of the school community. Three inter dependent bodies of research have been found to enhance

the school improvement planning and implementation effort: effective staff development, effective organization development, and effective planned change.

Singling out some guiding statements may help distinguish the elements of the ESR school improvement planning process. There is:

1. A focus on the single school as the strategic unit for school improvement.

2. A recognition that change is a long-term process and not an event [3-5 years].

3. A belief that change is possible without infusion of major resources or personnel.

4. An acceptance of the idea that effective schools and effective teaching research provides a useful base for school improvement planning and implementation.

5. A representative team of administrators, teachers, and parents who can provide the leadership and inspiration needed to plan and implement the design of school improvement.

School Improvement Planning Steps

Suggested steps in the school improvement planning process have been offered by schools who have reported consistent over-time success with their school improvement programs.

Step 1. Staff Orientation.

It is essential that the professional staff have the

opportunity to become familiar with the research and be helped to understand the relationship between the research and their practice. If an introduction to the research includes appropriate materials, video tapes and related media, and outside or local experts, the staff will more readily assimilate and accept the knowledge in relation to their locally felt needs for professional growth, and apply it appropriately.

When orientation is well orchestrated, the faculty's level of anxiety for the new or for change should diminish. The "mystique" which surrounds research will dissipate.

Also, it is satisfying for the faculty to know that not only will some changes will be expected of them, but that there will also be changes in policies, and within the organizational structure to implement and support school improvement. A common goal elicits a common bond. Faculty begin to share and speak a common language relative to the characteristics of effective schools. Above all a single common purpose unites the school—the overarching goal of increasing the level and altering the distribution of achievement.

Step 2.: Selecting a School Improvement Team.

While full faculty participation is desirable, the logistics of assembling an entire group for the time necessary to engage in effective planning, are complex. The solution is

a school improvement planning team consisting of a representative cross-section of the faculty, as well as the principal and others deemed appropriate. Schools strongly encouage a parent representative. It appears from the evidence to date that the success of the implementation process is significantly related to the time spent by the team. Allocating time for this important and difficult piece of work is a challenge for most schools, but worth the commitment.

Step 3: Improvement Goal Setting..

Early in the process the school improvement team [SET] must ask, " What will constitute evidence of school improvement in our school?" This discussion point is crucial. From the collective input, a shared consensus is reached and the entire improvement effort is from that moment forward centered on the selected goal. It is essential that the team assure that the goal reflects changes in student outcomes across the entire range of students served by the school.

Following this momentous decision, the team assesses the current and recent past history of the school on the outcome indicators implied in the improvement goal statement [for example, "improve our student's reading comprehension"]. This assessment serves as a baseline for assessing and monitoring school improvement.

The ESR process emphasizes change and improvement over time. It is impo rtant to avoid normative comparisons with

other schools and to continue to ask, "Are we doing better this year than we did last year?"

Step 4. Needs Assessment Process..

A distinguising feature of the Effective Schools Research process of school improvement is how the correlates of effective schools can be utilized to assess the needs of a given school.

Several instruments, two widely used, The Connecticut School Effectiveness Interview and Questionnaire and the comparable Connecticut School Effectiveness Questionnaire, seek to profile a school along s ven dimensions. The instruments help locate both the strengh or weakness of a certain characteristic, or perhaps its absence or presence. The following figure describes each dimension. The remarks are paraphrased from a synthesis conducted and reported by Joan Shoemaker, Connecticut State Department of Education.

Characteristics of Effective Schools.

1. SAFE AND ORDERLY ENVIRONMENT

   In the effective school there is an orderly, purposeful businesslike atmosphere which is free from threat of physical harm. The school climate is not oppressive and is conducive to teaching and learning.

2. CLIMATE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR SUCCESS

   In the effective school there is a climate of

expectation ... which the staff believes and demonstrates that all students can attain mastery of the essential school skills and they believe that they have the capability to help all students attain mastery.

3. INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

   In the effective school the principal acts as an instructional leader and effectively and persistently communicates that mission to staff, parents, and students. The principal understands and applies the characteristics of instructional effectiveness in the management of the instructional program.

4. CLEAR AND FOCUSED MISSION

   In the effective school there is a clearly articulated school mission through which the staff shares an understanding of and a commitment to the instructional goals, priorities, assessment procedures and accountability. Staff accept responsibility for students' learning of the school's learning of the school's essential curricular goals.

5. OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN AND STUDENT TIME ON TASK

   In the effective school teachers allocate a significant amount of classroom time to instruction in the essential skills. For a

high percentage of this time, students are engaged in whole class or large group planned, teacher directed, learning activities.

6. FREQUENT MONITORING OF STUDENT PROGRESS

   In the effective school, student academic progress is measured frequently. A variety of the assessment procedures are used. The results of the assessments are used to improve individual student performance and also to improve the instructional program.

7. HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONS

   In the effective school parents understand and support the school's basic mission and are given the opportunity to play an important role in helping the school to achieve this mission.

The data derived from the needs assessment, coupled with any other systematically collected data, such as a parent survey, provides the basis for the SET to develop its action plan and set the practices for the school improvement proces..

Step 5: Identifying Effective Practices.

At this point the SET has obtained a clear idea of the school's needs. They address the task of searching for and selecting approaches to tackle the problems. Lessons from research and descriptions of effective practice in promising

schools provide a resource for such examples. Schools should assume that other schools have had similar problems, and their workable solutions might be valid. But school teams are cautioned to be relatively certain, that the effective practices they examine are truly the best examples they can find. It is critical to seek good examples.

Step 6: Disseminating the Plan

Once the SET has prepared their recommendations on school improvement, the plan will be circulated among the staff as a draft. Feedback is invited at a meeting. Clarification with all staff is important. The faculty input is a vital part of the planning process. In the event that the staff cannot reach consensus on the plan, the ESR improvment process must move forward with the SET striving for the highest level of agreement possible. Change processes must not be blocked by minorities who want progress without change.

Step 7: Implementation of the Plan.

The ESR improvement plan may be a multiple or single year design. The crucial issue is that the plan be implemented as developed, or, if changed, a written explanation offered. It is important that the SET, as well as the total faculty see their planning effort as purposeful, not ritualistic. Monitoring and adjusting the plan are implicit in assuring success. To date these suggested steps have helped teams experience desired results.

There is ample opportunity for local school improvement team members to add to or delete some of the suggestions as they work within the context of their local school setting.

Summary

This essay describes a promising approach to school improvement for disadvantaged and minority students. To assure the effectiveness and success of the ESR-based effort, local school educators, managing the process, must believe that they as educators "can successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to them," and then they must demonstrate that they do. Ron Edmonds admonished educators to include all children, especially the children of the poor and minorities; this essay challenges educators to look back and then move forward, but toward the essential and quality education of all children. When looking to the past, it is likely that the practices you adopted, if you used them again, would produce the same results...you would get again what you were getting. When looking to the future it can be predicted that you may not always get what you want, but you, more often than not, will get what you expect.

A school community committed to school improvement based on ESR will protect and nuture the best from past practices, rejecting unsuccessful practices and, in their place, planning and promoting a set of expectations which encompass an alternative and better future. Evidence reported by schools using ESR -based school improvement processes supports the notion that schools are, indeed, able to improve in behalf of all their students, and are in fact, getting what they expect.